

Position Statement

Bioenergy in the UK

April 2013



WOODLAND
TRUST



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The Trust's view

- The Woodland Trust supports bioenergy, and woodfuel in particular, where it delivers genuine greenhouse gas savings, and has neutral or positive biodiversity and wider environmental impacts
- Bioenergy, like all renewables, can only be part of the solution to climate change in the UK; we also need to reduce consumption and increase energy efficiency
- Small-scale, local heat production using locally-produced woodfuel has real potential to deliver environmental gains if woodland management is carried out in a sustainable way, through stimulating creation of new native woodland and management of existing woods. This requires appropriate incentives, and appropriate levels of monitoring to ensure compliance with UK Forestry Standard and certification standards.
- Suitable measures to ensure sustainability, such as assurance or certification, are needed for all forms of bioenergy, covering the whole life cycle of bioenergy from feedstock production to energy generation.

The Trust will

- Promote use of woodfuel where this can bring real woodland biodiversity benefits, such as new native woodland planting, PAWS restoration, and beneficial and sustainable management in existing woods
- Consider opportunities on the Woodland Trust estate to demonstrate how woodfuel can be provided through the sustainable management of ancient woodland, PAWS restoration, and new native woodland management, working where possible with local woodfuel initiatives
- Continue to work with others in the sector to lobby for measures and criteria that ensure sustainability of bioenergy in the UK
- If and when a credible assurance scheme is developed, promote the use of biofuels in our own fleet of vehicles, and by its contractors, where such biofuels can be shown to come from a truly sustainable source.

A developing sector

The bioenergy sector has expanded in recent years driven by national policies cascading from Kyoto targets and EU legislation. Bioenergy encompasses a range of uses of organic material for energy production, including power, heat and transport fuels. The materials used range from traditional food crops such as wheat and oilseed rape used to produce bioethanol or biodiesel, to wood and residues from forestry and arboricultural operations, from dedicated plantings of short rotation coppice energy crops, or by-products from sawmills and similar. Slurries and wastes used to produce biogas through anaerobic digestion are also included.

The Woodland Trust's main interest is in the impact of bioenergy on woods and their wildlife, and on the wider landscape in so much as this affects biodiversity and ecological functioning. Our predominant interest is therefore in woodfuel, though we also take a view on the impact of energy crops on agricultural land and of wider bioenergy issues.

Opportunities and threats

Bioenergy offers positive opportunities for the environment. As a potentially carbon-lean fuel source it could lead to lower greenhouse gas emissions than use of fossil fuels. In terms of woodland biodiversity, demand for woody biomass could stimulate native woodland creation, restoration of Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) and beneficial management of woods that are currently unmanaged.

It also presents risks, including conversion of wildlife habitats to energy crops, more intensive land use, displacement of agricultural activity to other parts of the world with fewer environmental safeguards, new plantations of species that may be inappropriate or damaging, and unsustainable management of existing woodland. Increasing imports of woodchip and other biomass could increase the risk of new and damaging pests and diseases arriving in the UK.

The challenge for bioenergy policy is to encourage use of bioenergy that delivers environmental benefits, rather than that which could have negative impacts.

The Department of Energy and Climate Change produced a Bioenergy Strategy for the UK in April 2012. While this strategy was supportive of the use of wood as a low carbon source of energy, it provided little elaboration on how appropriate woodland creation and management might be encouraged in the UK and accepted that imports would still play an important role in bioenergy production for some time. This has caused considerable concern about the sustainability of feedstocks being imported and how this will be ensured, about potential increases in carbon emissions in the short to medium term due to "carbon debt", and about indirect land use change, whereby demand for bioenergy could drive damaging land use practices elsewhere.

Assuring sustainability of bioenergy remains a critical issue. The UK Forestry Standard and certification schemes such as UKWAS and FSC set a standard in the UK forestry sector but similar standards do not exist for agricultural crops, and ensuring sustainability of imports is more difficult. The Woodland Trust only supports bioenergy as a low carbon renewable energy source where it can be shown to deliver genuine environmental benefits through reducing greenhouse gas emissions and does not cause negative environmental impacts or biodiversity loss.

Biomass and woodfuel strategies exist in the individual countries of the UK, with a range of policy instruments, such as the Renewables Obligation, and incentives, Renewable Heat Incentive and woodfuel woodland management grants, to encourage growth in this sector. Woodfuel markets have been relatively slow to develop, partly due to the fragmented nature of both the woodland resource and the sector itself, which is reliant on relatively small businesses setting up.

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